

# Readers Theatre for the First Year Experience

浅 野 享 三

## Abstract

*This paper explores the possibilities of Readers Theatre (RT) to help the students develop the ability to work within a group and their skills of communication in Japanese. Also, there are indications that the capability of finding/solving problems is developed during the process of experiencing RT. All of these skills are necessary for students to be successful in college and after graduation. The roles of RT in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms at junior college should be investigated more, not just as an effective way of teaching/learning EFL, but as an alternative way of helping Japanese junior college students develop human relations.*

## 1 Introduction

With every year, the students who enter our junior college are different from those we used to be familiar with in the past. Among them, to illustrate this, are students who wish to study EFL at junior college not because they were strong in that subject at high school but because their high school EFL experience was very limited and so they wish to re-study it. Some may wish to take “advantage” of their English skill for seeking jobs although they score far lower than average on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC®). Some others may show almost no interest in reading, listening, grammar, and vocabulary building, but are eager to be able to speak English, yet having nothing to talk about.

It is difficult to determine when we started to accept different students, and yet they do exist now and have demonstrated behavioral changes in

the classrooms as well. For example, these students often need assistance from the teacher to find a partner or a group member in order to begin in-class activities. Otherwise they will find it really hard to sit with someone and they may end up standing where they are. Another example of the difference in students is that they have become less demanding, that is, they defer to the teacher's authority and think it is wrong to question how a class is conducted. It is much less frequent than before for a student to demand another try for a performance on the day of a test even if she is dissatisfied with it. She is likely to give up a re-try unless a teacher mentions the possibility of having another one.

Fewer and fewer of these different students, who are grade-conscious, then, come to see me for a consultation on how to study English in spite of their unsuccessful academic performances. What caused these students to enter junior college? How can we help our students re-learn EFL at junior college through teaching Readers Theatre (RT)? This article first attempts to examine the extraordinary change in the number and the characteristics of junior college students. Then it discusses the RT students and their experiences. Last, a little study on the reactions from the RT students will give support to the usefulness and the potential of RT.

## **2.1 Changes in Enrollment**

School Basic Survey (MEXT, 2009) states that Japanese junior colleges had an enrollment of approximately 169,000 in 1999, comprising 18.3% of all the university and junior college entrants combined. Since that year on, however, junior colleges have had difficulty in meeting their student quota. In 2009, the enrollment number plunged to some 73,000, which was 10.7% of all university and college entrants. The acute and abrupt downturn of the number of junior college entrants resulted from an intense decrease in applicants in the last decade. It seems obvious that, compared to 1999,

there have been many changes in the characteristics of enrolled students. According to Ozao (2008), some of the characteristics that enrolled students fail to show at college include communicative ability in Japanese, problem-finding skills and general knowledge and intelligence. Meanwhile, about 55% of the high school students answered they need to acquire basic English skills before graduation from school. In contrast, only 10% of the high school graduates said that they successfully acquired such skills and knowledge at school.

## **2.2 First Year Education**

To deal with such distinctive changes displayed by the enrolled students, quite a few Japanese colleges and universities have been taking countermeasures for several years now. Academic associations in the related fields have been established: Japan Association of Developmental Education (2005) and Japanese Association of First-Year Experience at Universities and Colleges (2008). More and more schools provide special courses for freshmen in the first semester or two for credit or non-credit. Some institutions even provide supplementary and remedial courses to those third-year high school students who passed their entrance examinations during the time after acceptance and before formal education begins.

These efforts or approaches mentioned above are called “First Year Seminar” or “Freshman Seminar” and they began in the 1970’s in state universities and small liberal arts colleges in the U. S. (Yamada, 2008). In the late 1970’s Freshman Seminar offered such courses and programs as presentation, communication, academic skills including reading and writing, searching for information, and debate. Also, time management, career support, building human relationships, and community service were included in the seminars, too.

Another MEXT report (2010) states that Japanese schools offered

almost the same courses and programs as U. S. universities and colleges in 2008. Of a total of 595 universities, 82% developed special programs for the first year students: 505 schools provide students with academic skills programs including reading and writing, 449 schools presentation and discussion, 447 schools motivational programs, and 417 schools information search programs for first year students. Additionally, career support, computer literacy, note-taking, problem-finding/solving and time-management programs follow the top five in this order.

Hamana (2008) reports that first year education in Japan is evaluated highly both by the students and the administrators who responded to questionnaires, revealing that 59% of the students considered it very useful and that university presidents rated first year education 3.65 on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the highest). A score of 3.65 was the fourth highest of the 14 other items, and higher than computer literacy programs, educational environment, extra-curricular activities, and liberal arts education.

### **3 Why RT for First Year Experience?**

As we have looked at the changes in the students over the years and the new educational implementations, a total of 82% schools across the country introduced their students some kind of first year experience programs (MEXT, 2010). With the different types of students now, our English classes, too, have to face the challenge of teaching them each time, every week.

In order to be relevant, foreign language instruction will change to fit the students. It will help them get prepared to solve complicated problems, have communicative skills in their mother tongue, work successfully with a group and become confident that they can succeed. Among the English language instructional activities, RT experiences will serve the needs of our students at the junior college and after graduation.

In the first class of mine, just a week from the entrance ceremony at college, the students were told to form groups of four and assigned a reading text in English. In each group they thought about how to produce a RT performance from the literature they were given out. They had to analyze the text first, and then practiced reading it aloud together. They also spent time for thinking about staging before rehearsing. These RT experiences were all part of a regular class at college but students needed a lot of time for preparation other than the class periods because they were required to give linguistics presentations as well for the class.

One of the RT students gave us a positive comment of the work they did:

I knew nobody at that time! When we were done, however, I appreciated all the group members, who I might have never met otherwise. (Student A)

The whole process of producing RT is conducted with a group of people. There are some individual responsibilities expected in the entire process, but most of the efforts are done cooperatively. It is no exaggeration that RT is a product of cooperation from the beginning to the end.

Through the whole process, the RT students, as Johannessen and Kahn (1997) states, were challenged by others, and revised and refined their thinking.

I could have never made friends with the group members if I had done it all by myself. Right now I prefer to work with a group. (Student B).

Another student commented on the possibility of RT activities as scaffolding:

I could not voice my opinions in discussions at first ... because I was weak in English during my high school days, but in one of the discussions later they listened to me when I gathered my courage to make a suggestion on staging. (Student C)

Wilhem, Baker, and Dube (2001) propose that the goal of education is to have students use their strategies to participate democratically in their communities and cultures. Confronted with the different students over the years, RT language instruction can have another function in addition to its denotative role of providing expression skills.

## 4 Conclusion

Foreign language instruction can and should function as a positive tool to develop students' abilities of human relations. With the sharp decrease in the number of 18-year-olds, it is expected that more and more entrants have less and less experience of interacting with others successfully. RT, therefore, will play the role of helping students grow both personally and socially as well as providing them with experiences in foreign language arts.

## References

- Hamana, A. (2008). *Shonenji Kyoiku no Hituyosei to Kanosei*. [The Necessity and Possibility of the First Year Experience]. *Daigaku to Gakusei*. [University and Student]. Japan Student Services Organization. 54, 6–15.
- Johannessen, L. R., & Kahn, E. A. (1997). Teaching English Language Arts for a Technological Age, *The Clearing House* 70 (6), 305.
- Retrieved on 9/18/2010 from <http://www.jstor.org/pss/30185873>
- MEXT, or Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology. (2009). *Gakko Kihon Chosa Heisei 21 Nendo (kakuteichi) Kekka no Gaiyou*. [Summary for the Results of School Basic Survey, 2009 (definite data)]. [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/toukei/chousa01/kihon/kekka/k\\_detail/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2009/12/18/1288104\\_2.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/toukei/chousa01/kihon/kekka/k_detail/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2009/12/18/1288104_2.pdf)
- Ozao, R. (2008). *Komyunikeshon Riterashi*. [Communication Literacy]. *Daigaku to Gakusei*. [University and Student]. Japan Student Services Organization. 54, 57–63.
- University Promotion Division, Higher Education Bureau, MEXT. (2010). *Daigaku ni okeru Kyoiku Naiyo to no Kaikaku Jokeyo ni tsuite (Heisei 20 Nendo) (Gaiyo)*, [On the State of Reformation of the Educational Content at University, 2008

(Summary)

Wilhem, J., Baker, T., & Dube, J. (2001) *Scaffolding learning*, adapted from *Strategic reading: Guiding students to lifelong literacy*. NH: Heinemann.

Retrieved on 9/28/2009 from <http://www.myread.org/scaffolding.htm>

Yamada, R. (2008). *Shoniji Kyoiku no Rekishi to Riron*. [History and Theory of the First Year Experience]. *Daigaku to Gakusei*. [University and Student]. Japan Student Services Organization. 54, 16-23.